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DHAHRAN SENDS  
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PREL PGOV SA

SUBJECT: SHI'A CLERIC ASKS U.S. TO EXERT MORE INFLUENCE  
TOWARD REFORM

REF: RIYADH 1053

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reason 1.4  
(d).

¶1. (C) Sheikh Mohammed Hassan, introduced by a post contact as a leading Saudi follower of Karbala-based Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi Al-Mudarassi, told PolOff in a June 11 meeting that the U.S. should play a more active role in calling for reform in Saudi Arabia. "All reform in the Kingdom is taking place because of the outside environment," Hassan argued, "but the government may be looking at the environment like a storm that will blow over. If it does, the government will revert back to its old practices." Asked for an example, Hassan replied, "Yes there is more freedom of expression now.

If you say something the government doesn't like, the mubahith calls you in and makes you sign a contract saying you won't do anything like that again. Before, they would have put you in prison. But there's no guarantee they won't start jailing people again, if the environment changes."

¶2. (C) Anticipating a question about the municipal councils, Hassan called them "a paper reform," arguing that they had no real power and that the government would use them to deflect criticism. He further argued that elections were not the key to reform in Saudi Arabia: "Americans think that elections will bring democracy, but they won't. Look at Iraq - it is a democracy only on paper. If you had elections in Saudi Arabia, the Salafis would win." In Hassan's opinion, Saudi Arabia had to lay the foundation for democracy before advancing to further elections, particularly in the areas of civil society, rule of law, and education. "It is far easier to open a business here than a civil society organization," he noted. "In fact, new civil society organizations are not officially permitted. If they were, you would see a flood of new organizations, which would be very healthy for the country." He acknowledged that new cultural groups had formed recently in Qatif, but said they could never reach their full potential as "they were formed in spite of the government, not with its blessing."

¶3. (C) Hassan also commented briefly on his relationship with Ayatollah Al-Mudarassi, saying that he had visited Al-Mudarassi in Karbala several times since the fall of Saddam and that Al-Mudarassi had also visited Saudi Arabia during a haj (confirming the report in reftel). Since the death of Al-Mudarassi's uncle and mentor Ayatollah Mohammad Al-Shirazi (in 2001), Hassan explained, Al-Shirazi's followers had split, with one group following Al-Mudarassi and the other following Al-Shirazi's brother, Sadiq Al-Shirazi. Mohammed Al-Shirazi, Hassan noted, was very politically active and was not considered a marja'. In contrast, Hassan continued, Al-Mudarassi had chosen "to

remove himself from direct involvement in politics in the mold of Ayatollah Sistani" and was considered a marja'. Asked if Al-Mudarassi followed the political situation in Saudi Arabia, he replied that Al-Mudarassi's interest was in the welfare of the Shi'a population and that he would involve himself in Saudi Arabia's political affairs only in the most dire of scenarios.

¶4. (C) Comment and bio note: The post contact who arranged the meeting with Hassan described him as "one of the Shirazis" who had gone into exile in Iran, and later Syria and elsewhere, in the early 1980s and returned to the Kingdom in the 1990s. While clearly very interested in political issues, Hassan is certainly not as politically active as other Shirazis like Hassan Al-Saffar. He seems to be an example of a former Shirazi follower who now concentrates on more genuinely religious and community welfare pursuits. For example, he leads a small, informal hawza, or Shi'a religious school, to provide continuing and advanced training for Saudi Shi'a students who had studied in hawzas in Iran and Syria. Hassan's analysis of the political situation in Saudi Arabia was somewhat more pessimistic than what we have heard from other Shi'a clerics and activists. End comment and bio note.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)  
OBERWETTER